

## Editorial

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### Medical Education for the Millenium

This year students entering the Medical School at Queen's University will begin a new course. The success of this in equipping doctors for practice in the 21st century will depend on our ability to predict the environment in which medicine will be practised. Trends already in evidence are likely to be further developed. The need to apply new discoveries and new technologies will lead to increasing specialisation. Increasing numbers of elderly in the population will mean that the pattern of disease will change with an increasing emphasis on the management of chronic disease and disability. Doctors will be required not only to treat illness in their patients but to actively promote health in the populations which they serve. They will be required increasingly to work in teams with other health professionals and they will have to recognise more and more that clinical decisions also have economic implications which will require them to work with Government and other funding agencies to ensure cost effective care. Doctors will therefore need skills not just in clinical areas but also in the ethical, social, economic and political aspects of medicine. It will be important that Medical Education provide experiences which reflect the reality of contemporary medical practice and not that of another era.

Much has been written about the problems of Medical Education. There is first the pressure to extend the scope of courses to encompass the increasing knowledge and technology attached to every discipline which burdens the student with information. The process of education thus becomes distorted with the student emphasis centring on the passive acquisition of knowledge in order to achieve examination success rather than the development of an attitude to learning based on enquiry and the exploration of knowledge. A major aim of change must be to reduce factual content and yet retain those skills which are fundamental to the practice of medicine. At the very least the undergraduate course should provide students with the knowledge and skills sufficient to enable them to undertake the duties of the pre-registration year. This objective has

allowed us to identify elements of a core curriculum and to define more clearly that which we would expect all doctors to share. The course should also enable students to develop cognitive skills so that they can use their knowledge from across all disciplines to define problems and identify solutions. In addition it should create in students a desire to continue learning throughout their professional career.

There have been criticisms not only of the process of Medical Education but also of its product. Doctors describing their experiences as patients have commented that while technical aspects of their care were superb, those which related to their emotional and psychological needs were often seriously deficient. Surveys of our own graduates demonstrate a concern that not sufficient attention is given to skills in communication and to the values which should provide the moral and intellectual basis of medical practice.

Achieving all of these educational goals will require much more than a definition of curricular aims and objectives. A key element will be the enthusiasm, motivation and ability of those involved in teaching. It is through effective teaching in clinical settings that students will develop the cognitive skills and appropriate attitudes which relate to patient care. Teachers need to be able to demonstrate in themselves and to develop in others the capacity to think critically, to have both scientific and humanitarian values and to respect the dignity and autonomy of the patient. In changing the educational process we should not neglect the powerful influence of role models on student behaviour. This will represent a considerable challenge for clinicians. I hope that in spite of the many pressures on their time, many will still want to echo the words of Sir William Osler; 'I desire no other epitaph than that I taught medical students in the wards as I regard this as by far the most useful and important work I have been called upon to do'.

Prof. Randal Hayes